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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

THE ORIGIN OF THE GOSPELS—A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE

Conducted by
PROFESSOR ERNEST WILLIAM PARSONS
Rochester Theological Seminary

Introduction

In the course to be outlined under the caption given above we are attempting to introduce the readers to a problem interesting and important in itself, but of even greater interest and importance because of its bearing on our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and of the Christian movement in the early days of its fine rapture and enthusiasm.

Even a slight familiarity with modern biblical study is sufficient to inform one of the change of attitude toward many questions in that field. Certain matters which were formerly considered as settled were so considered because assumptions were made upon the basis of preconceived theories without submitting those assumptions to any proper historical test. These assumptions are now being tested and some of the conclusions based on them challenged.

The problem before us, the origin of the Gospels, was not a problem in former times, although from the time of Ammonius, in the third century, there were vagrant gleams of it. The divine element in the Gospels was thought to preclude the question of origin. If the question were raised by some curious or inquiring mind the traditional information was considered a sufficient answer. The divine inspiration had wrought through apostles or apostolic men to produce our Gospels—no further inquiry seemed necessary.

There are, however, certain indisputable facts in our Gospels that have compelled the raising of the question of origin. The preface to the Gospel according to Luke, in which he speaks of the existence of many gospel records and of his own comparative and inquiring method, the striking resemblances in the first three Gospels and the equally striking differences between them, the peculiarities of the Fourth Gospel and its remarkable divergence from the first three—these are some of the facts that modern biblical students have faced and for which they are endeavoring to find an explanation. No longer will it be candid to fall back on a theory of inspiration and thus dismiss the question; the interests of the kingdom of truth demand the investigation of the origin of the sources of our knowledge of Jesus.

For approximately a century and a half men of patient, devout scholarship have given themselves to the solution of the problem. The use of the Gospels in the early Christian writers has been carefully examined in order to discover the existence of Gospels and their repute in the churches of the first two centuries.

The references to the Gospels by the writers of these centuries have been collected and subjected to a minute investigation in order that we may know what Gospels these Christians used, how they used them, and what their opinions as to their origin were. The Gospels themselves have been closely scrutinized to see what story they will tell of the process through which they came into being. An important feature of this study of the Gospels is the almost uniform practice of treating the first three Gospels as a group and dealing with the Fourth Gospel by itself. This has resulted in a clarifying of the problem which was impossible so long as there was a fundamental assumption that they could and must be harmonized. The final solution of the problem, or, better, the problems, has not yet been reached, but much information has been gathered and many phenomena investigated, with the result that our knowledge of the manner in which our Gospels originated is more abundant and certain than at any previous period.

In our course we shall consider the first three Gospels, or the Synoptic Gospels, as they are called, apart from the Fourth Gospel, being convinced that in this way a clearer apprehension of the whole matter will be gained. The course will thus fall into two main divisions, the first of which will have three important aspects. The outline is as follows:

I. The Synoptic Gospels.

1. External Evidence or the Tradition as to Origin.
2. Internal Evidence or the Witness of the Gospels.
 - a) Earlier Theories.
 - b) Present Views.

II. The Fourth Gospel.

Formerly it was the custom to lay considerable emphasis upon the external evidence as to the existence and authorship of our Gospels. The position taken was that the discovery of the statements of the early Christian Fathers on these matters would constitute the final answer to the query concerning origin. But scholars of the present day have come to feel that an uncritical acceptance of the statements of these devout men is no longer adequate for the inquiring mind. Evidence which used to be considered cumulative is now suspected of being early and vague tradition repeated and reaffirmed. In any case, the tradition or external evidence no longer gives us the assured knowledge which it once claimed to give. Nevertheless, in any comprehensive survey of the problem it is entirely necessary to consider what the men who lived nearest to the days of gospel origins and whose writings have been preserved have to say on the subject of our study.

If the importance of external evidence has diminished in recent days, that of the internal witness has greatly increased. Indeed, it is the clear word of the latter that has caused us to scrutinize, and in some cases to suspect, the value of the former. By far the greater part of the work done on our problem has concerned itself with what is known as the synoptic problem, which is the question raised by the literary relationships of the first three Gospels. For a century and a half this matter has been under review, and while a few positions have been reached with tolerable certainty some parts of the final solution still elude us. But sufficient has been done to make it absolutely necessary to revise some views of gospel origins formerly held. It will be a necessary and informing part of our study to

discover what theories have been held concerning the process by which our Gospels came into being and to learn the views which are held at the present time.

For the Fourth Gospel we shall pass in rapid review the traditional statements concerning it and shall consider its relation to the other Gospels, its characteristic features, and the forces which wrought in the production of the document.

Books Required in This Course

- T. Nicol, *The Four Gospels in the Earliest Church History*.
- E. A. Abbott, The article "Gospels" in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, cols. 1809-40.
- E. D. Burton, *A Short Introduction to the Gospels*.
- A. Wright, *The Composition of the Four Gospels*.
- F. C. Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*.
- A. Harnack, *The Sayings of Jesus*.
- E. D. Burton, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism and Their Application to the Synoptic Problem*.
- W. Sanday et al., *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem*.
- F. W. Worsley, *The Fourth Gospel and the Synoptists*.
- W. Sanday, *The Criticism of the Fourth Gospel*.
- E. F. Scott, *The Fourth Gospel, Its Theology and Purpose*.
- B. W. Bacon, *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate*.

Additional Bibliography

- J. Moffatt, *Introduction to the New Testament*. *Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel*.
- C. Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age*.
- P. Wernle, *The Sources of Our Knowledge of the Life of Jesus*.
- B. W. Bacon, *The Beginnings of Gospel Story*.
- J. Drummond, *An Inquiry into the* P. W. Schmeidel, *The Johannine Writings*.
Invaluable for the study of the synoptic problem are:
W. G. Rushbrooke, *Synopticon*.
A. Wright, *Synopsis of the Gospels*.
Sir John Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*.

Part I. The Synoptic Gospels

1. External Evidence or the Tradition as to Origin

The works assigned for reading in this portion of our study are T. Nicol's *The Four Gospels in the Earliest Church History* and that part of the article "Gospels" in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* which is written by E. A. Abbott; namely, Vol. II, cols. 1809-40.

Turning to the first work, the writer of this course frankly admits its unsatisfactory character. The external evidence concerning the origin of the Gospels is treated in nearly all the Introductions to the New Testament, but monographs of recent date on the subject are not numerous. The volume before us has been considered to be, in the main, the most convenient for our purpose. Some criticism of its positions will be offered later, but mention must be made now of its chief fault. The attitude of the author is decidedly apologetic and in many places entirely uncritical, while historical feeling is almost entirely lacking. Nevertheless,

the book does excellent service in gathering the references to the Gospels in convenient form. For this we are grateful, even though there may be frequent dissent from the conclusions drawn from them. It is sometimes a salutary discipline to be compelled to read a volume much of which one must view critically and to which one will refuse assent.

The work is the Baird Lecture for 1907 and offers in the first two chapters a review of certain critical theories held during the past century. The only justification for the inclusion of these chapters is expressed in the following words: "They [these theories] place the Gospels late in the early Christian history." The contention which the author wishes to establish is "that the Four Gospels are authentic and trustworthy productions of the Apostolic age, that they have come down to us practically unchanged from the hands of their Apostolic authors, and that their influence can be traced, individually and collectively, from a very early time, moulding the spiritual life, and intellectual development, and social and missionary activities of the rapidly extending Christian Church."

In chaps. iii-vii inclusive the author deals with the Gospel collection of four, and only four. His purpose is to demonstrate the acceptance of our four canonical Gospels by the church under the authorship indicated by their present titles. He does not commence with the earliest references but prefers to start amid surer surroundings. Accordingly, he takes his stand at the end of the second Christian century and reviews the testimony of Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian. Origen is cited as a witness for the fourfold Gospel. While admitting the existence of other Gospels, he says, "Four alone the Church of God approves." The authors are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the Gospels were produced in that order. Clement of Alexandria, while admittedly no rigid canonist, is considered to yield testimony to the exclusive authority of the fourfold Gospel. In a quotation from him preserved by Eusebius he sets forth the tradition that Matthew and Luke were written first, that Mark was the record of Peter's Gospel and was written at the request of many in Rome who had heard Peter preach, and that the Fourth Gospel is a "spiritual Gospel," written to complete the "bodily" Gospels of the other writers. Tertullian speaks of the four Gospels, mentioning the Gospels of Luke, Matthew, and John, and considering the Markan Gospel to be in reality that of Peter. John and Matthew are apostles, Luke and Mark are apostolic men. So then at the end of the second century we have Alexandria and Africa testifying to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The fourth chapter deals with the testimony of Irenaeus to which our author attaches great importance. He knows of only four authoritative Gospels, and they are those of the four evangelists. According to him Matthew published a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language. Mark's Gospel is the record of Peter's preaching, while Luke sets forth the Gospel which Paul heralded. John published his Gospel in Ephesus. After an elaborate defense of Irenaeus the writer passes in review the evidence of the Muratorian Fragment, whose habitat is Rome and whose date is about 170 A.D., and that of the *Diatessaron* of Tatian, representing the church in Syria and originating in the period 150-70 A.D. Both of these testify to the four Gospels, and to those alone. While the Fragment mentions only the Gospels according to Luke and John, it is almost certain that in its complete form the document referred to Matthew and Mark as well.

The testimony of Justin is examined, with the result that he appears to use our present Gospels and possibly another. He does not name their authors, but speaks of "memoirs of the apostles and those who followed them." He appears to accept the Petrine quality of the Second Gospel. Thus our author brings the external testimony down to the middle of the second century.

A short chapter follows in which there is a discussion of a symbolic passage in the Shepherd of Hermas, which is considered to form the basis of the fantastic argument of Irenaeus as to the necessity of the fourfold Gospel. The discussion seems scarcely worthy.

In chaps. viii–xiii inclusive the author takes up the first three Gospels separately and, covering much of the ground traversed in the previous chapters, undertakes to show the more or less extensive use of these Gospels by the Christian writers of the second century. Little of significance is added except the testimony of Papias. This man, who was bishop of Hierapolis, published about the year 125 A.D. five books of *Expositions of the Oracles of our Lord*. In a fragment of this work preserved by Eusebius he has this to say regarding Matthew: "So then Matthew compiled his oracles in the Hebrew tongue, and everyone interpreted them as he was able." This statement, so apparently lucid and final, is exceedingly difficult. Our author's conclusions, however, are as follows: "That the Gospel according to Matthew appeared at first in an Aramaic dress seems to be established by the testimony of Papias. . . . That the Greek St. Matthew is substantially identical with this Hebrew Gospel of Matthew appears to me in the highest degree probable."

Regarding the Gospel of Mark the testimony of Papias is that Mark wrote down accurately though not in order whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ, his source of information being the preaching of Peter. This Papias has learned from the Presbyter John, who is for our author none other than John the apostle.

No such explicit early statement is available for the Third Gospel, and the writer covers again the ground of the early Church Fathers and concludes that the Lukan tradition is authentic.

Thus is the evidence presented. From the time of Irenaeus and the Muratorian Fragment there is a clear tradition of the fourfold Gospel under the names which they now bear. The earliest quotation of a Gospel by its writer is by Theophilus of Antioch, about 180 A.D., when he cites the Fourth Gospel as the work of John. Moving back from this date we find that about the middle of the second century our four Gospels were used, but the nearest designation of authorship is Justin's "apostles and those who followed them." Quotations from the four Gospels, more or less accurate, are found much earlier, but the question of authorship is touched only by Papias in the statements quoted.

It was natural for our author to accept the statements of Papias, Irenaeus, and others at their face value and, treating them as cumulative evidence, to appeal frequently to "the unanimous tradition of the early church." It was entirely in accord with his purpose to do so. But the matter is not so simple. If modern study of the Gospels has done anything it has demonstrated that our present Gospel of Matthew is not a translation from the Hebrew or Aramaic, or, in fact, a translation of any kind. If Papias' tradition regarding the oracles is a correct

one, he must have reference to a different document from our First Gospel. Regarding Mark there are certain things that go to support the statement of Papias, but even so, some modifications are necessary. The Lukian tradition is bound up with the authorship of the Book of Acts and the "we sections." While we are grateful for any information on the points at issue, the evidence is by no means so conclusive as Mr. Nicol would have us think. The present writer's opinion is that he entirely overestimates the evidence of Papias and Irenaeus.

There are not lacking features which make one wonder whether the author himself is entirely satisfied. The elaborate defenses of Irenaeus and Papias savor in parts of special and desperate pleading. Moreover, the author has failed to consider adequately certain important matters. One is the possibility, not to say probability, that the testimony of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian may be in the main repetitions of the Papias tradition and thus not independent witnesses. Another matter is the divergence in detail among these writers. It is true that in the names of the authors and in the number of the Gospels they are in agreement, but there are significant differences as to their order and circumstances of composition. One is keeping well within bounds in saying that the external evidence regarding the origin of the Gospels does not give us certain ground on which to stand. This may be a matter for regret, but it is always well to face facts. The volume before us quite overstates the matter.

Upon examining the other work assigned for reading in this part of our course we discover that Mr. Abbott covers almost the same ground as Mr. Nicol but with important differences. He begins with the earliest references and proceeds as far as Origen, thus commencing with what is vague and afterward noting the clearer, if later, statements. The chief difference, however, is one of attitude and historical feeling.

According to this writer the external evidence regarding the Gospels consists of statements and quotations. Discussing the statements he notes the preface to the Third Gospel, which implies the existence of many Gospels of a diverse and somewhat obscure character. These narratives were written while the teaching of the apostles was oral, and this fact points to a time when the apostles had passed away. These Gospels were not accurate nor in chronological order. The contribution of Papias is reviewed and the conclusions reached are that Papias had no direct connection with the apostles, but gained his information from elders whom the apostles had appointed and from their followers. Papias probably reached early manhood about 105 A.D. when yet the Fourth Gospel was not published, although preached orally. It is probable that at the time of his writing, 115-30 A.D., the Fourth Gospel was attaining recognition as an apostolic Gospel. He is silent as to Luke and John, being either ignorant of them or ranking them lower than Matthew and Mark. He makes mention of Mark as the record of Peter's teaching and of a compilation in Hebrew by Matthew of the Lord's oracles. Thus the evidence of Papias does not include a fourfold Gospel, and his information is not so direct as some might think.

After citing the vague testimony of Justin Martyr the author passes to the Muratorian Fragment, Irenaeus, and Clement, where the fourfold Gospel appears clearly. Attention is drawn to the apologetic character of some of the statements

regarding Mark and to the divergence in detail of the several passages. Papias recognizes Matthew and Mark as apostolic, but is silent regarding Luke and John. Justin regards the Synoptic Gospels as memoirs written by apostles and prefers Luke. The Muratorian Fragment welcomes the Fourth Gospel as supplementing the other three and sets forth a revelation to Andrew as a factor in its composition and alleges a species of composite authorship for it. From Irenaeus on the tradition is strong and clear.

It is at once evident that the external evidence preceding Irenaeus (185 A.D.) is scanty and ambiguous, and that it forms no secure foundation for knowledge of Gospel origins.

The quotations from the Gospels are examined with the following results: Up to the middle of the second century there are traces of Johannine thought and tradition, but there is nothing to prove that John was recognized as a Gospel. Our sources are scanty, however, and too much must not be assumed from them or from their silence. The favorite Gospel of Justin was Luke, but if he knew the Fourth Gospel he was suspicious of it. The *Diatessaron* shows that Tatian ranked John with the Synoptic Gospels. The complete acceptance of the Gospels from Irenaeus on renders further investigation unnecessary.

Mr. Abbott is not nearly so confident as to the security which the external evidence gives us as is Mr. Nicol. While some will dissent from some of his conclusions and inferences, the unprejudiced reader will readily admit the fairness of the treatment.

As indicated earlier, the former emphasis on the testimony of the Church Fathers is passing and the appeal is now to the Gospels themselves. Where their indubitable facts are not consistent with the statements of later writers the latter must yield. It is to be noted, however, that external testimony enables us to trace back the existence of our Gospels to a comparatively early period, even if it largely fails us in specific statement as to origin.

Questions for Further Study

1. The influence of the statements of Papias upon later tradition.
2. The influence of the conflict of the Church with second-century heresies upon the insistence on apostolic authorship or guaranty for our Gospels.